DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 435 165 EC 307 497

AUTHOR England, Richard
TITLE Theoretical Considerations for Special Educators in the Psychological Adjustment of Fostered, Adopted, or Other Placements of Children.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 13p.; "This paper served as a basis for a presentation at the Tennessee Joint Conference on Children and Youth with Disabilities (1998)."
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adopted Children; Adoption; At Risk Persons; Child Development; Children; Coping; *Early Intervention; *Emotional Adjustment; *Emotional Disturbances; Environmental Influences; Family Environment; *Foster Children; Infants; Performance Factors; *Placement; Psychological Characteristics; Resilience (Personality); Toddlers

ABSTRACT

In this paper, an overview of children's psychological processes is presented within the context of adoption, foster care, or other type of placement which requires the child to develop the coping skills necessary to continue toward optimal growth psychologically, cognitively, and socially. Findings from a research review indicate that children raised in loving, caring, secure, consistent, and stable environments have a greater probability of developing socially, psychologically, physically, emotionally, and morally. Further, when alternative placements are necessary, if the child is placed in an appropriate setting the probability of the child achieving optimal growth through the developmental stages is greatly increased, provided that there is a sense of permanency. The probability of optimal growth is contingent on the willingness of the new primary caregivers to provide a safe and loving environment. Children faced with an uncertainty in their placements, whether long-term foster care or questionable placement with a biological parent that is subject to change, were found to have an increased probability of social maladjustment over their adopted counterparts. Regardless of the placement decision, the report finds that the earlier a permanent placement is determined, the better the chances for the child's adjustment. (Contains 33 references.) (CR)

Theoretical Considerations for Special Educators in the Psychological Adjustment of Fostered, Adopted, or Other Placements of Children

Richard England, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor of Special Education
Director, Office of Disability Services
Licensed School Psychologist
Freed-Hardeman University
Henderson, Tennessee, USA

April, 1998

(This paper served as a basis for a presentation at the Joint Conference on Children and Youth with Disabilities sponsored by the Tennessee Association of Administrators of Special Education; Tennessee Council for Exceptional Children; Tennessee Division of Early Childhood; Tennessee LRE for Life Project; and Tennessee State Department of Education.)

Abstract

In this paper an overview of the psychological processes in children is discussed within the context of adoption, foster care, or other type placement which requires the child to develop the coping skills necessary to continue toward optimal growth psychologically, cognitively, and socially, but are at-risk for other conditions which can impact the developmental process. The conclusions point to the need for early determination of a permanent placement when considering the best interest of the child.

Theoretical Considerations for Special Educators in the Psychological Adjustment of Fostered, Adopted, or Other Placements of Children

The existing climate of concern when discussing the placement of children for adoption, foster care, or other alternative placement accentuates the need for continued studies regarding what happens to children physically, emotionally, and psychologically when a family structure is altered. It continues to be necessary, therefore, to carefully study the impact of placement decisions in order to determine how best to meet the needs of the children. Complicating the process of determining the impact of placement of children with individuals other than the natural parents is the legal environment. Most states in the United States have specific laws which in theory are to focus on the "best interest of the child." Laws frequently speak directly to the rights of children to be raised in loving homes which are determined to be capable of providing proper care. These laws are the direct result of public outcry over the realization that a significant number of children are placed at-risk due to poor living situations. In practice, however, research into the legal framework reveals that "there remains important judicial unwillingness to break with the concept that the parents have something approaching a legal property right in their children" (Derdeyn, 1990, p. 332).

Conflicts between the statement of the law and practice of the law continue to raise the need for informed decisions. Informed decisions concerning children can only be made when consideration is given to carefully examining what indeed is the "best interest of the child" not only for the immediate situation, but for the overall well-being of the child as the level of maturity and responsibility for her or his own life increases. The responsibility also exists for special educators, social workers, psychologists, health care professionals, and others who work directly with children to review and carefully consider the research when making decisions about children. It is probably inevitable that one's personal value system will create a subjective analysis of any data. Such an inevitability, coupled with prevailing legal ramifications of any decision, again accentuates the need for informed decision making based on constant study and examination of research.

An Overview of Psychological Processes in Children

From birth through the adult years an individual is involved in developmental

processes crucial to interpersonal functioning. Theorists have worked toward developing schema which would bring into clearer focus the cognitive, emotional, moral, social, and coping tasks than can be expected at certain ages. Piaget's stages of cognitive development have become a mainstay in the study of children.

> Child development, in Piaget's view, is best described as the emergence of progressively more logical forms of thought - that is, as the development of ways of thinking that become increasingly effective in helping the individual adapt to the demands of his environment (LeFrancois, 1973, p. 157).

These more "logical forms of thought" which move from the sensorimotor (ages 0-2 years), preoperational (2-7 years), concrete operational (7-11 years), to the formal operational (11-15 years) exhibit characteristics of development from motoric intelligence to strong idealism (LeFrancois, 1973).

Paralleling studies of cognitive development, other theorists have focused on the developmental tasks, social roles, and coping behaviors based on life stages. Drawing heavily from the work of Erik Erikson, Blocher and Rapoza (1981) proposed life stages from infancy (birth - 3 years) through the examination of life in later years (65+ years) which identified specific social roles, developmental tasks, and coping skills to be developed at each stage. A significant disruption in the pattern of development at any stage has the potential to impede developmental tasks and coping skills within the stage and hinder progression to the next level of development.

Within the context of cognitive and life-stage development, it is especially important to note the attachment to a primary caregiver which occurs in infancy and early childhood, and influences future developmental tasks. In a discussion of ethnological theory in attachment relationships Berk (1989) observes that "the human infant . . . is endowed with a set of built-in behaviors that elicit parental care and, as a result, increase the baby's chances of survival" (p. 444). Consistent with the love and object roles formed during infancy during the developmental course of attachment, an infant moves through a preattachment phase, an attachment-in-the-making phase, to the phase of "clearcut" attachment. The clearcut attachment has been identified occurring from 6 months to 2 years. Until the time of clearcut attachment, at approximately 7 months of age, the departure of the mother is least likely to arouse protest by the infant. After this age the reaction rises until at 18 months research indicates that more infants become upset at the departure of the mother than at any other age during infancy. Concerning this phenomena, Berk observes, "It is no

accident that the period of clearcut attachment is concurrent with the emergence of Piagetian object permanence. Infants cannot have a discriminating attachment to the mother and engage in efforts to find her when she is not in view without a cognitive appreciation of her as a permanent object, separate from the self and others" (Berk, p. 446). If the coping strategies, or the potential for developing such strategies, are not in place within the context of the family, there is the increased probability of family dysfunction due to the inability to develop appropriate problem solving, cognitive restructuring, social supports, or other skills necessary to work with the infected child (Hardy, et al, 1994).

For children the development of attachment to the primary caregiver is critical to the future well-being of the child, regardless of whether the caregiver is the natural parent, foster parent, or adoptive parent. The continuity of quality childcare throughout the early childhood years further increases the probability of appropriate adjustments. For children in care outside the biological family, the interpersonal factors within the new family are critical in establishing an environment which can facilitate secure attachment. Acceptance and satisfaction in the parent-child relationship for adoptive parents along with a secure environment has been found to be predictive of positive adjustments in adoption (Kadushin, 1980). Again, the continuity of the environment is critical in the development of the child. "Being able to give children a prolonged time to settle into a new family helps both children and parents" (Brooks, 1996). The sense of security then allows the child to better move through the social roles and developmental tasks essential to positive growth. The attachments developed between 7 months of age and 18 months allow trust to develop in order for the child to achieve the motoric intelligence levels; accommodations to a daily routine; and the approaching, receiving, and accepting skills necessary to cope.

Case studies may demonstrate, however, that in the absence of strong psychological ties to the primary caregivers, children may develop a coping mechanism that allows for resilience in the developmental pattern which in fact accelerates to higher levels of moral and ethical reasoning abilities (Vance, 1990; Lewis, et al, 1994; Bose, et al, 1994). The observation remains, however, that children have the greater chance of positive physical, cognitive, psychological, social and moral growth when in a consistent and continuous loving environment. Ideally, this environment is provided by the biological parents. In situations where the biological parent(s) cannot, or will not, provide the appropriate home environment, children may be placed in settings where an alternative primary caregiver is identified. These placements require children

to make enormous adjustments in order to maintain a sense of homeostasis, or balance, in their lives. As a result of research into the coping mechanisms employed by children in alternative placements, models are beginning to emerge to provide a framework of understanding the adjustment processes used by children who are adopted, fostered, or placed in other settings.

Adoption Adjustment

In 1990 David Brodzinsky and Marshall Schechter published a significant compilation of material on adoption, foster care, and other placements for children. Their work provided a framework for the discussion of theoretical perspectives on adoption adjustment; research on adoption, foster care, and institutional placement; clinical issues; and social policy issues in adoption and foster care. The underlying assumption for the study was that adopted children may be at-risk for various academic and psychological problems. Citing volumes of research to substantiate their claim, the authors indicate that "Research on the symptomatology presented by the children referred to clinics also indicates that adoptees are more likely than their nonadopted counterparts to display a variety of acting-out problems (e.g. aggression, stealing, lying, oppositional behavior, running away, hyperactivity), low self-esteem, and a host of learning difficulties" (Brodzinsky, 1990, p. 3). Due to the increased risk of these children to experience difficulties in developing socially, psychologically, and in some instances physically, Brodzinsky has proposed a model of adjustment. Again, the model was developed with certain assumptions with the primary assumption being that a child's adjustment to adoption is "mediated by various cognitive-appraisal processes and coping efforts" (Brodzinsky, 1990, p. 10). As one moves through the model toward adaptational outcomes, specific variables in the process influence the coping efforts which lead to the outcomes.

The child's ability to cope with the demands of an alternative to the traditional family structure with biological parents, particularly coping with the stresses associated with placement in an adoptive home or permanent foster home, reflects a process of adaptive grieving. As the children mature, the capacity for understanding increases leading to the significant insight that in order for one to be adopted, one must be surrendered. "Thus in elementary school years, children, view adoption not only in terms of family building, but also in terms of family loss" (Brodzinsky, 1990, p. 13). This sense of loss may deepen in adolescent years as the child begins to develop their own sense of identity. In order to effectively cope with the realization of the changes

that have occurred, the child must develop a cognitive structure which will provide greater equilibrium in the organism-environment interaction, or a greater balance of reciprocity between the actions of the child and the actions of those impacting the child (Kohlberg, 1984; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980; Reitz and Watson, 1992). The acceptance and satisfaction demonstrated by adoptive parents by providing a warm and nurturing environment has generally been predictive of positive adjustment on the part of the child.

Contributing greatly to the sense of security and interpersonal trust is the commitment by both the child and adoptive family to each other. Brooks (1996) observed that "Though the process of parenting usually involves biological parents and child, it need not. Like stepfamilies, adoptive families are a testament to the human capacity to form strong, caring bonds that last a lifetime, even though children are not biologically related" (p. 437). Within Brodzinsky's model, genetics and biological factors are not assumed to directly manifest themselves. The variables are rather assumed to interact in complex ways with postnatal environmental factors to produce patterns of adjustment in adoption (Brodzinsky, 1990). Brodzinsky cites H. D. Kirk (1964) and his social role theory of adoption in identifying the behaviors of adoptive parents which may help, or hinder, the acceptance of the new relationships by the child. One behavior is that parents may try to emphasize that there is no difference between the adopted child and the adoptive parents by placing an emphasis on forgetting that the child is adopted. This type of interaction, or pattern of behavior, is referred to as rejection-of-difference. The second pattern is when both adoptive parents and children have the freedom to discuss and explore the differences within the relationship. This pattern has been labeled acknowledgment-of-difference. Kirk suggests that the rejection-of-difference may impede the developing of a trusting, family atmosphere while the acknowledgment-of-difference encourages openness about the differences. Though Kirk argues that these patterns exist along a continuum, Brodzinsky (1987) also indicates that extreme views at either end of these beliefs may lead to a pattern of poorer adjustment of the children.

Considering the variables outlined in Brodzinsky's model, and the complex psychological processes required for a child to develop, consistency by the primary caregivers within the context of a warm, loving environment, appears to be a cornerstone for psychological, social, and moral growth. In other words, for a child to progress through the developmental stages previously outlined there must be a constant in the life of the child. Identity formation, particularly in adoption, is a

complex experience with multiple, interlocking family and social inputs (Hoopes, 1990). When considering the "best interests of the child", a stable and permanent environment is critical. The debate continues, however, over whether adoption, foster care, institutional placement, or highly unstable relationships with a biological parent(s) present the best scenario when considering the interests of the child. It should be stated that the purpose of this paper has been to focus on the child, not the interest of the parent, whether biological, adoptive, or a foster parent. The variable of the primary caregiver will certainly have an impact on the ability of the child to develop a sense of identity, and the ability to cope with added stress while progressing through the stages of development.

Conclusion

Based on the research evidence available, the inevitable conclusion is that children raised in loving, caring, secure, consistent, and stable environments have a greater probability of developing socially, psychologically, physically, emotionally, and morally. Further, though the ideal situation is for a child to be raised by the biological parents, when alternative placements are necessary, if the child is placed in the appropriate setting the probability of the child achieving optimal growth through the developmental stages is greatly increased, provided there is a sense of permanency. The probability of optimal growth is contingent on the willingness of the new primary care givers to provide a safe and loving environment, regardless of the health condition. If the care givers provide the appropriate setting, and the setting is determined to be stable for the child, the child has a greater probability for stable psychological, emotional, and social development. Children faced with an uncertainty in their placement, whether long-term foster care or questionable placements with a biological parent(s) that are subject to change, have an increased probability of social maladjustment over their adopted counterparts.

Regardless of the placement decision, the earlier a permanent placement is determined, the better the chances for the child. Increased awareness of this fact should serve as a strong influence for professionals in social work, health care, education, and within the legal system as decisions are made about the "best interest" of children. Derdeyn, however, makes the following observation:

> Increased recognition of the importance of the psychological parent-child relationship has led to considerable efforts with regard to permanency planning for children in foster care. This action has led in

> turn to development of some rudimentary rights for the foster parent-child relationship, acceptance of adoption by foster parents, and new initiatives like risk adoption. But these developments, as positive as they are to the children who benefit from them, pale in comparison to the central issue of parental rights (Derdeyn, 1990, p. 345).

The issues of psychological adjustment of the children in alternative family situations must be considered within the context of the rights of the children in conjunction with parental rights. If parental rights are considered void of any serious consideration of the true best interest of the child in need of a permanent home, given the evidence provided, it is also inevitable that the difficulties associated with social maladjustment within society will not only be perpetuated, but have the possibility of increasing to higher levels. The child void of opportunity to grow psychologically and socially will also be faced with difficulties progressing in moral development. The stagnation of this growth could impede the development of the coping tasks required to effectively work through more complex difficulties not only within society, but also in developing a sense of identity. The child who has a questionable sense of identity will have difficulty understanding and knowing a role to be assumed within society. Without a stable framework of relationships within a family structure, which provides a loving environment to assist in the establishment of the child's identity, the child will not have a basis or frame of reference to establish their own positive relationships beyond childhood.

References

Berk, L. E. (1989). Child development. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Blocher, D. H. & Rapoza, R.S. (1981). Professional and vocation preparation. In A. W. Chickering (Ed.), The modern American college. (pp. 212-231). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bohman, M. & Sigvardsson, S. (1978). An 18-year prospective, longitudinal study of adopted boys. In E. J. Anthony, C. Koupernik, & C. Chiland (Eds.), The child in his family: Vol. 4: Vulnerable children. New York: Wiley.

Bohman, M. & Sigvardsson, S. (1979). Long-term effects of early institutional care: A prospective longitudinal study. Journal of Chid Psychology and Psychiatry, 20, 111-117.

Bohman, M. & Sigvardsson, S. (1980). A prospective, longitudinal study of children registered for adoption: A 15-year follow-up. Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavia, 61, 339-355.

Bohman, M. & Sigvardsson, S. (1990). Outcome in adoption: Lessons from longitudinal studies. In D. M. Bordzinsky & M. D. Schechter (Eds.), The psychology of adoption. (pp. 93-106). New York: Jossey-Bass.

Bose, S. Moss, H., Brouwers, P., Pizzo, P., & Lorion, R. (1994). Psychologic adjustment of human immunodeficiency virus-infected school-age children. Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics,15(3), 26-33.

Bowlby, J. (1969). Attachment and loss: Vol. 1: Attachment. New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1973). Attachment and loss: Vol. 2: Separation. New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1980). Attachment and loss: Vol. 3: Loss, sadness and depression. New York: Basic Books.

Brodzinsky, D. M. (1987). Adjustment to adoption: A psychosocial perspective. Clinical Psychology Review, 7, 25-47.

Brodzinsky, D. M. (1990). A stress and coping model of adoption adjustment. In D. M. Brodzinsky & M. D. Schechter (Eds.), The psychology of adoption. (pp. 3-24). New York: Oxford University Press.

Brooks, J. B. (1996). The process of parenting. (4th ed.). Mountain View: Mayfield.

Derdeyn, A. P. (1990). Foster parent adoption: The legal framework. In D. M. Brodzinsky & M. D. Schechter (Eds.), The psychology of adoption. (pp. 332-347). New York: Oxford University Press.

England, R. (1996). Adoption, foster care, or other: An overview of critical aspects of psychological adjustment in children. Paper presented at the Eighth Annual Dr. Henry R. Zurhellen Research Symposium, The University of Memphis.

Erikson, E. H. (1968). Identity: Youth and crisis. New York: Norton.

Gilligan, C. (1981). Moral development. In A. W. Chickering (Ed.). The modern American college. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hardy, M.S. et al (1994). Coping and communication among parents and children with human immunodeficiency virus and cancer. Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, 15(3), 49-53.

Havens, J. et al (1994). Psychiatric morbidity in school-age children with congenital human immunodeficiency virus infection: A pilot study. Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, 15(3), 18-25.

Hoopes, J. C. (1990). Identify formation. In D. M. Brodzinsky & M.D. Schechter (Eds.), The psychology of adoption. (pp. 144-166). New York: Oxford University Press.

Kadushin, A. (1980). Child welfare services (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan.

Kirk, H. D. (1964). Shared fate. New York: Free Press.

Kohlberg, L. (1984). The psychology of moral develoment: The nature and validity of moral stages. San Francisco: Harper and Row.

Lefrancois, G. R. (1973). Of children: An introduction to child development. Belmont: Wadsworth.

Lewis, S. L. et al (1994). Living beyond the odds: A psychosocial perspective on long-term survivors of pediatric human immunodeficiency virus infection. Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, 15(3), 12-17.

Loehlin, L. C., Willerman, L., & Horn, J. M. (1982). Personality resemblances between unwed mothers and their adopted-away offspring. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 42, 1089-1099.

Mellins, C. & Ehrhardt, A. (1994). Families affected by pediatric acquired immunodeficiency syndrome: Sources of Stress and Coping. Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp.54-60.

Piaget, J. (1932). The moral judgment of the child. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Reitz, M. & Watson, K. W. (1992). Adoption and the family system: Strategies for treatment. New York: Guilford.

Santrock, J. W. (1996). Adolescence (6th ed.). Madison: Brown and Benchmark.

Schechter, M. D. & Bertocci, D. (1990). The meaing of the search. In D. M. Brodzinsky & M. D. Schechter (Eds.) The psychology of adoption. (pp. 62-89). New York: Oxford University Press.

Triseliotis, J. & Hill, M. (1990). Contrasting adoption, foster care, and residential rearing. In D. M. Brodzinsky & M. D. Schechter (Eds.), The psychology of adoption. (pp. 107-120). New York: Oxford University Press.

Vance, E. (1990). A tree for Eric. The Educational Forum, 54(3), 293-314.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

REPRODUCTION RELEASE
(Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATORS IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT OF FOSTERED, ADOPTED, OR OTHER PLACEMENTS OF CHILDREN

Author(s): RICHARD ENGLAND, Ed.D.

Corporate Source:

Publication Date:

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic/optical media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) or other ERIC vendors. Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following options and sign the release below.

Check Here, Please

__X__ Check here for Level 1 Release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) and paper copy.

or

_____ Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only.

or

_____ Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only.

Sign Here, Please

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but neither box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

"I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic/optical media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries."

Signature: Richard England
Printed Name: RICHARD ENGLAND, Ed.D.
Address: C/O FREED-HARDEMAN UNIV.
HENDERSON, TN. 38340

Position: ASST. PROF. OF SP.ED.
Organization: FREED-HARDEMAN UNIV.
Telephone Number: (901) 989-6077
Date: 11.8.99

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, *or* , if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of this document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents which cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:

Address:

Price Per Copy:

Quantity Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant a reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name and address of current copyright/reproduction rights holder:

Name:

Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

You can send this form and your document to the ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. They will forward your materials to the appropriate ERIC Clearinghouse.

ERIC Acquisitions
ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1589
(800) 328-0272
ericec@cec.sped.org
http://ericec.org